



Lawson to 'aggressively' seek election changes

By **BRIAN A. HOWEY**

INDIANAPOLIS - Secretary of State Connie Lawson intends to push an "aggressive" elections legislation package in the 2013 Indiana General Assembly, with a biennial voter registration cleanup as a possible centerpiece.

It was prompted after the U.S. Department of Justice indicated that at least 10 Indiana counties have more registered voters than the 2010 Census says exist. An independent group called Judicial Watch has sued the state, seeking to force Indiana to clean up voter rolls.

"Indiana's election officials are shirking their responsibility to maintain clean voter registration lists. The citizens of Indiana should be outraged by the indifferent attitude their election officials have taken with respect to the National Voter Registration Act and to clean elections," said Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton. "This is our first lawsuit. We plan to sue other states who failed to take reasonable steps to remove dead and ineligible voters from the rolls."

Lawson is one Hoosier official who cannot be characterized as shirking her duties. She describes Indiana Code requirements for maintaining voter lists as highly technical and complicated, involving state agencies such as the Departments of Correction and Health and the BMV, as well as the 92 county clerks' offices.

DOC is in charge of flagging inmates convicted of felony crimes for removal from voter rolls and when that information is received the inmate's name is immediately taken off the voter rolls. "But another type of prisoner might be held in a county jail," Lawson explained. "Counties report very sporadically and it's a written list, not an electronic list."

DOH reports names of Hoosiers who have died. That information is transmitted to county clerks "on a daily basis."

"When a clerk receives that information, they double check the name and date of birth," Lawson explained. "But once in a while, the information of the Department of Health might not exactly match. If they have a doubt, they won't remove it."

In the case of a name change, a woman who has married and takes a new name can make that change at the county clerk's office or at the polling station on Election Day. People who move can change their voter registration information at BMV. "The most common way is people register on line or through mail," said Brad King, the Republican Elections Division member. "The BMV information is a little more complicated."

Other than those events, it's up to the individual counties to keep their rolls current and there is no state law that requires counties to do that on a regular basis.

In 2006, when the last statewide voter list cleanup occurred, it was prompted by a Department of Justice court order. The Republican and Democrat Election Commission members agreed to conduct the cleanup. Lake County ended up purging 137,164 names from its list alone. Porter County removed 124,958, Marion removed 68,120 or 10%, while Madison and Hamilton counties each removed 42,000 names. Statewide, 1,134,427 voter registrations were cancelled.

As for a regular cleanup, Lawson said "it would be very possible that legislation would find that a priority. If the legislature requires the state to do it, we could go ahead and proceed. They would have to appropriate \$2 million."

The money would be used for a postcard to be sent to every registered voter asking them to verify their voting address. A returned card would require another to be sent and if the respondent doesn't send it back within 30 days, that person would be put on an inactive list. If that individual would miss two consecutive federal elections, he or she would be removed from the rolls.

"It's important to note that this is not an efficient process," said Lawson, who was appointed secretary of state on March 16 following the conviction of Charlie White on election fraud charges. "It's just not that easy."

Lawson will be meeting with her elections staff and local elected officials today to consider what she calls an "aggressive" elections legislative package. She will also consult with Sue Landske, Senate Elections Committee chairman, and Eric Koch, Landske's counterpart in the House.

As to whether there will be changes in the presidential ballot petition signature process which came to light after a Howey Politics Indiana/South Bend Tribune investigation into the 2008 cycle, Lawson said, "I think you could see something like that. We have been in contact with vendors. We want to make it more convenient for voter registration officials to certify petitions. It would be a software change. If you were checking petition signatures, it would keep track of numbers as you go. It would be helpful to campaigns and committees."

HPI and the South Bend Tribune discovered that hundreds of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama presidential ballot petition signatures had been forged in St. Joseph County.

It resulted in the indictment of three St. Joseph election officials and former Democratic Chairman Butch Morgan. ❖